The Bengal School and Cultural Nationalism

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Company Painting

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Art in India had a different purpose prior to the coming of the British. It could be seen as statues on temple walls, miniature paintings that often illustrated manuscripts, decoration on the walls of mud houses in villages, among many other examples. With the colonial rule around the eighteenth century, the English were charmed by different manners and customs of people of all ranks, tropical flora and fauna, and varying locales. Partly for documentation and partly for artistic reasons, many English officers commissioned local artists to paint scenes around them to get a better idea of the natives. The paintings were largely made on paper by local artists, some of whom had migrated from erstwhile courts of Murshidabad, Lucknow or Delhi. To please their new patrons, they had to adapt their traditional way of painting to document the world around them. This meant that they had to rely more on close observation, a striking feature of the European art, rather than memory and rule books, as seen in traditional art. It is this mixture of traditional and European style of painting that came to be known as the Company School of Painting. This style was not only popular among the British in India but even in Britain, where albums, consisting a set of paintings were much in demand.

Ghulam Ali Khan, Group of Courtesans, Company Painting, 1800–1825. San Diego Museum of Art, California, USA

Raja Ravi Varma,
Krishna as envoy,
1906. NGMA, New Delhi, India

Raja Ravi Varma

This style declined with the entry of photography in India in the mid–nineteenth century as camera offered a better way of documentation. What, However, flourished in the art schools set up by the British was the academic style of oil painting that used a European medium to depict Indian subject matter. The most successful examples of this type of painting were found away from these art schools. They are best seen in the works produced by self-taught artist, Raja Ravi Varma of the Travancore Court in Kerala. By imitating copies of European paintings popular in Indian palaces, he mastered the style of academic realism and used it to depict scenes from popular epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. They became so popular that many of his paintings were copied as oleographs and were sold in market. They even entered people's homes as calendar images. With the rise of nationalism in India by the end of the nineteenth century, this academic style embraced by Raja Ravi Varma came to be looked down upon as foreign and too western to show Indian myths and history. It is amidst such nationalist thinking that the Bengal School of Art emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The Bengal School

The term 'Bengal School of Art' is not fully accurate. It is true that the first move to create a modern, nationalist school happened in Bengal but it was not restricted to this region alone. It was an art movement and a style of painting that originated in Calcutta, the centre of British power, but later influenced many artists in different parts of the country, including Shantiniketan, where India's first national art school was founded. It was associated with the nationalist movement (*Swadeshi*) and spearheaded by Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951). Abanindranath enjoyed the support of British administrator and principal of the Calcutta School of Art, E. B. Havell (1861–1934). Both Abanindranath and Havell were critical of colonial Art Schools and the manner in which European taste in art was being imposed on Indians. They firmly believed in creating a new type of painting that

was Indian not only in subject matter but also in style. For them, Mughal and Pahari miniatures, for example, were more important sources of inspiration, rather than either the Company School of Painting or academic style taught in the colonial Art Schools.

Abanindranath Tagore and E. B. Havell

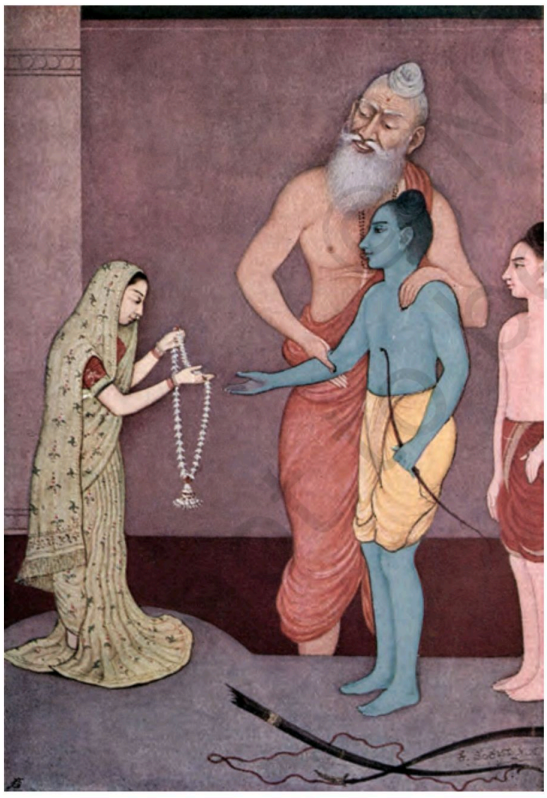
The year 1896 was important in the Indian history of visual arts. E. B. Havell and Abanindranath Tagore saw a need to Indianise art education in the country. This began in the Government Art School, Calcutta, now, Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata. Similar art schools were established in Lahore, Bombay and Madras but their primary focus was on crafts like metalwork, furniture and curios. However, the one in Calcutta was more inclined towards fine arts. Havell and Abanindranath Tagore designed a curriculum to include and encourage technique and themes in Indian art traditions. Abanindranath's *Journey's End* shows the influence of Mughal and Pahari miniatures, and his desire to create an Indian style in painting.

Art historian Partha Mitter writes, "The first generation of the students of Abanindranath engaged in recovering the lost language of Indian art." To create awareness that modern Indians could benefit from this rich past, Abanindranath was the main artist and creator of an important journal, *Indian Society of Oriental Art*. In this manner, he was also the first major supporter of *Swadeshi* values in Indian art, which best manifested in the creation of Bengal School of Art. This school set the stage for the development of modern Indian painting. The new direction opened by Abanindranath was followed by many younger artists like Kshitindranath Majumdar (*Rasa-Lila*) and M. R. Chughtai (*Radhika*).

Shantiniketan — Early modernism

Nandalal Bose, a student of Abanindranath Tagore, was invited by poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore to head the painting department in the newly established Kala Bhavana. Kala Bhavana was India's first national art school. It was part of the Visva-Bharati University founded by Rabindranath Tagore at Shantiniketan. At Kala Bhavana, Nandalal founded the intellectual and artistic milieu to create an Indian style in art. By paying attention to the folk art forms that he saw around in Shantiniketan, he began to focus on

Nandalal Bose, Dhaki, Haripura Posters, 1937. NGMA, New Delhi, India



K. Venkatappa, Rama's marriage, 1914. Private Collection, India

the language of art. He also illustrated primers in Bengali with woodcuts and understood the role of art in teaching new ideas. For this reason, Mahatma Gandhi invited him to paint panels that were put on display at the Congress session at Haripura in 1937. Famously called the 'Haripura Posters', they depicted ordinary rural folks busy in various activities — a musician drumming, a farmer tilling, a woman churning milk, and so on. They were painted as lively colourful sketchy figures and shown as contributing their labour to nation building. These posters echoed with Gandhi's socialist vision of including marginalised sections of Indian society through art.

Kala Bhavana, the institution where Bose taught art, inspired many young artists to carry forward this nationalist vision. It became a training ground for many artists, who taught art in different parts of the country. K. Venkatappa in South India being a prominent example. They wanted art to reach out to a wider public rather than only the elite, anglicised class of people.

Jamini Roy is a unique example of modern Indian artist, who after undergoing academic training in the colonial Art School rejected it only to adopt the flat and colourful style of folk painting seen in villages. He wanted his paintings to be simple and easy to duplicate to reach a wider public and based on themes like women and children, specifically, and rural life, generally.

However, the struggle between the Indian and European taste in art continued as seen in the art policy of the British Raj. For example, the project for mural decorations for Lutyen's Delhi buildings went to the students of Bombay School of Art, trained in realistic studies by its Principal, Gladstone Solomon. On the other hand, the Bengal School artists were allowed to decorate the Indian House in London under close British supervision.

Pan-Asianism and Modernism

The colonial art policy had created a divide between those who liked the European academic style and those who favoured Indian style. But following the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the *Swadeshi* movement was at its peak and it reflected in ideas about art. Ananda Coomaraswamy, an important art historian, wrote about *Swadeshi* in art and joined hands with a Japanese nationalist, Kakuzo Okakura, who was visiting Rabindranath Tagore in Calcutta. He came to India with his ideas about pan-Asianism, by which he wanted to unite India with other eastern nations and fight against western imperialism. Two Japanese artists accompanied him to Calcutta, who went to Shantiniketan to teach wash technique of painting to Indian students as an alternative to western oil painting.

If, on one hand, pan-Asianism was gaining popularity, ideas about modern European art also travelled to India. Hence, the year 1922 may be regarded as a remarkable one, when an important exhibition of works by Paul Klee, Kandinsky and other artists, who were part of the Bauhaus School in Germany, travelled to Calcutta. These European artists had rejected academic realism, which appealed to the *Swadeshi* artists. They created a more abstract language of art, consisting of squares, circles, lines and colour patches. For the first time, Indian artists and the public had a direct encounter with modern art of this kind. It is in the paintings by Gaganendranath Tagore, brother of Abanindranath Tagore, that the influence of modern western style of paintings can be clearly seen. He made several paintings using Cubist style, in which building interiors were created out of geometric patterns. Besides, he was deeply interested in making caricatures, in which he often made fun of rich Bengalis blindly following the European style of living.

Different Concepts of Modernism: Western and Indian

The divide between anglicists and orientalists, as mentioned earlier, was not based on race. Take the case of the Bengali intellectual, Benoy Sarkar, who sided with the anglicists and considered modernism that was growing in Europe as authentic in an article, 'The Futurism of Young Asia'. For him, the Oriental Bengal School of Art was regressive and anti-modern. On the other hand, it was E. B. Havell, an Englishman, who was in favour of return to native art to

Amrita Sher-Gil, Camels, 1941.
NGMA, New Delhi, India

create a true modern Indian art. It is in this context that we have to view his collaboration with Abanindranath Tagore.

Amrita Sher-Gil, whom we will discuss in the next chapter, is a perfect example of the meeting of both these points of view. She used the kind of style that the Bauhaus exhibition showed to depict Indian scenes.

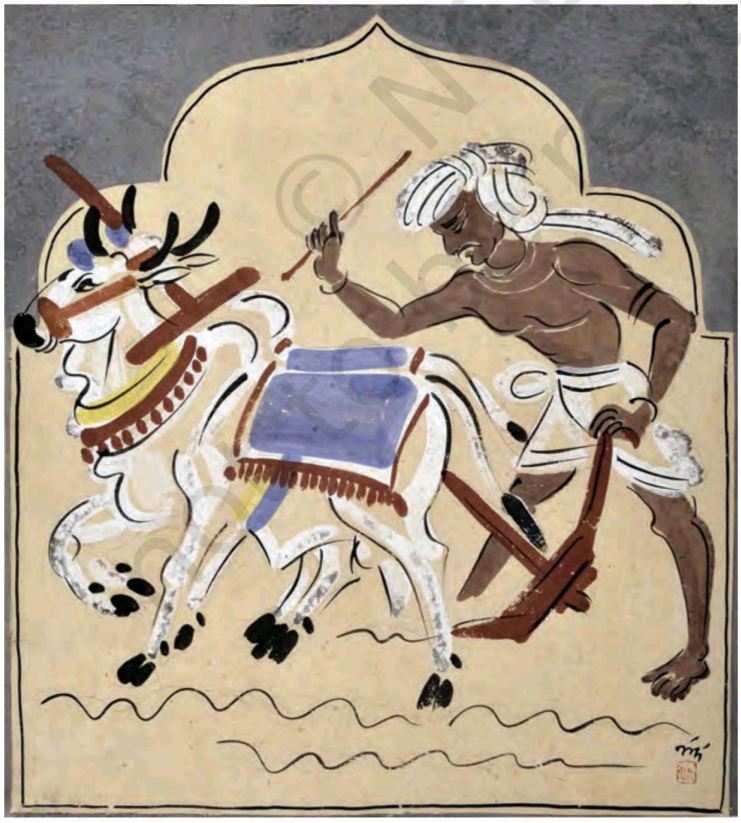
Modern art in India can be best understood as a result of the conflict between colonialism and nationalism. Colonialism introduced new institutions of art like art schools, exhibition galleries, art magazines and art societies. Nationalist artists, while accepting these changes, continued to assert more Indian taste in art and even accepted a larger Asian identity for a while. This legacy was going to leave a deep impact on the later history of modern Indian art. Therefore, it will keep moving from internationalism, i.e., draw ideas from the West, and indigenous, i.e., to be true to one's own legacy and tradition.

EXERCISE

1. Collect a local newspaper of the past two weeks. Select images and text from these that you consider important in the life of modern democratic state of India. With the help of these visuals and texts, compile an album that narrates the story of an independent sovereign India in the contemporary world.
2. Comment on the importance of the Bengal School artists in the making of a national style of art?
3. Write your view on any one painting by Abanindranath Tagore.
4. Which art traditions of India inspired the Bengal School artists?
5. What were the themes that Jamini Roy painted after he abandoned the academic style of painting?

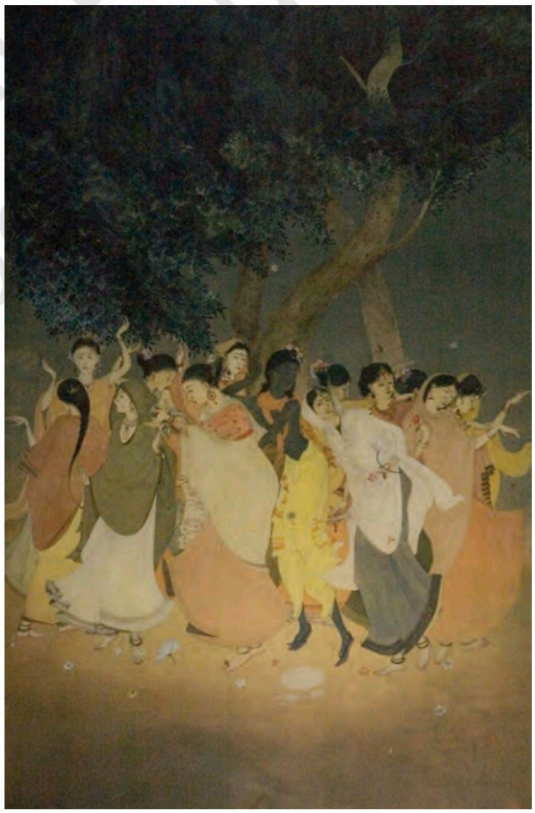
TILLER OF THE SOIL

This is one of the panels made by Nandalal Bose in 1938 for the Haripura Congress. In this panel, a farmer is shown ploughing a field— the daily activity of a common man and in a village. To capture the essence of village life in his Haripura panels, Bose made pen-and-ink brush studies of local villagers. He used thick tempera in a bold cursory style and broad brushwork. This technique and style was reminiscent of the folk art practice of *patuas* or scroll painters. Folk style is purposely used to represent the rural life. It also conveys political statement of Gandhi's idea of village. The background of the poster has an arch. The strong senses of formal design, bold colour scheme, and their blend of nature and convention in this panel reflect Bose's inspiration from Ajanta wall paintings and sculptures. More than 400 posters were prepared at Kala Bhavana under the supervision of Bose, who was influenced by the idea of Gandhi. These posters place common people in the centre of nation building. Bose utilised art to build the nation's moral character.



RASA-LILA

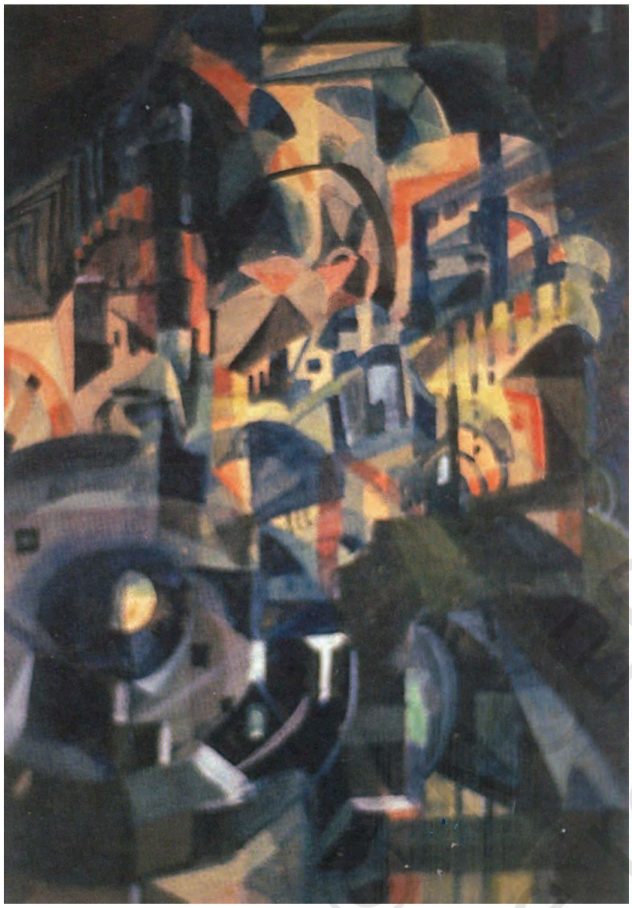
This is a watercolour painting in wash technique portraying the divine life of Sri Krishna made by Kshitindranath Majumdar (1891–1975). He was one of the early students of Abanindranath Tagore, who carried forward the wash tradition with some deviations. Rustic, thin, slender figures, modest gestures, idyllic settings and delicate watercolours express his stylistic features. He has painted mythological and religious subjects. Man Bhanjan of Radha, Sakhi and Radha, Lakshmi and Birth of Sri Chaitanya are few examples of his extraordinary power of expression inspired by his understanding of religious concepts as a follower of the Bhakti Marga. In this painting, Krishna is dancing with Radha and *sakhis,* and the background of trees creates a simple village atmosphere as illustrated in the *Bhagvata Purana* and *Gita Govinda*. Figures and their cloths are drawn with simple, flowing, delicate lines. The sublime moods of characters are captured well. Krishna and *gopis* are drawn with same proportion. Thus, humans and God are brought on the same level.



RADHIKA

This is a wash and tempera painting made on paper by Abdul Rehman Chughtai (1899–1975). He was a descendant of Ustad Ahmed, the chief architect of Shahjahan. He was also the designer of the Jama Masjid and Red Fort in Delhi and Taj Mahal in Agra. He was influenced by Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. Chughtai experimented with wash technique and infused a distinct character of calligraphic line, typical in Mughal manuscripts and old Persian paintings. It gives a deeper sensuous quality to his paintings. In this painting, Radhika is portrayed walking away from a lighted lamp in a gloomy background as if in a state of trance or remorse. The subject is based on Hindu mythology. He also painted characters from legends, folklore and history of the Indo-Islamic, Rajput and Mughal world. The light and shade of the background represent the finest heights of simplification. Chughtai had stylistic affinities with renowned Chinese and Japanese masters. The character is drawn gracefully, with a lyrical quality of calligraphy in every line. It is as if a poem finds visual form. Other works, which carry these poetic qualities, are *Gloomy Radhika*, *Omar Khayyam*, *Dream*, *Hiraman Tota*, *Lady under a Tree*, *Musician Lady*, *Man behind a Tomb*, *Lady beside a Grave* and *Lady lighting a Lamp*.

CITY IN THE NIGHT

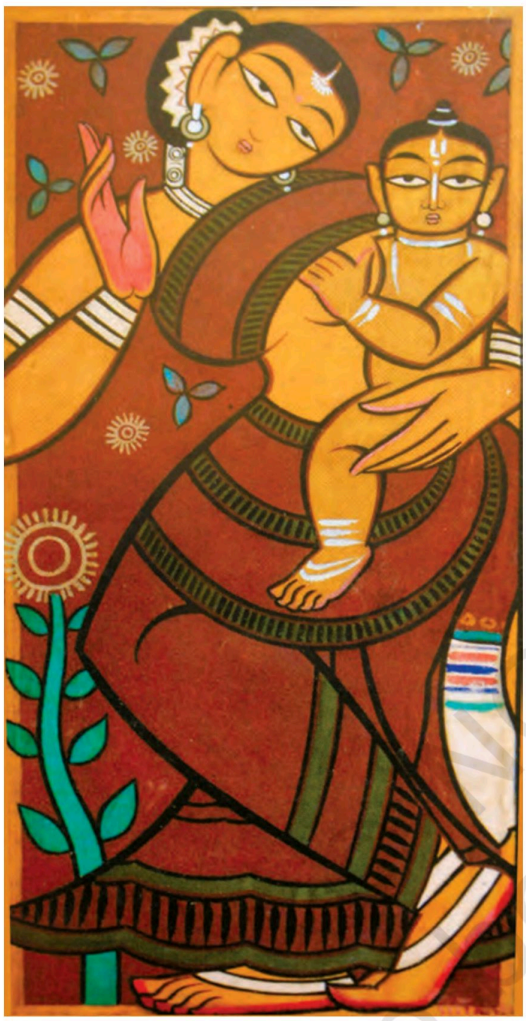


This is a watercolour painting made by Gaganendranath Tagore (1869–1938) in 1922. He was one of the earlier Indian painters, who made use of language and syntax of Cubism to render his ideas. The inner experiences of turbulence are externalised through a blend of allegorical and formal, transforming the static geometry of Analytical Cubism into an expressive apparatus. He softened Cubism's formal geometry with a seductive profile, shadow or outline of human form. He visualised the mysterious world of his imaginary cities like Dwarka (Lord Krishna's legendary abode) or Swarnapuri (The Golden City) through multiple viewpoints, multi-faceted shapes and jagged edges of Cubism. He painted an interplay of diamond-shaped planes and prismatic colours, resulting in fragmented luminosity to render the mountain ranges of the city. Zigzag planes together are able to create a tight formal structure of the painting. The painting is mysteriously illuminated by artificial light, one of the features of theatre. It shows his involvement with his uncle Rabindranath Tagore's play staged in their house. The painter has taken many references of stage props, partition screens, overlapping planes and artificial stage lighting. Endless corridors, pillars, halls, half-open doors, screens, illuminated windows, staircases and vaults are painted on the same plane to conjure a magic world.

RAMA VANQUISHING THE PRIDE OF THE OCEAN

This is a Puranic (ancient mythological stories) theme painted by Raja Ravi Varma. He was one of the first Indian painters to use oil paint and master the art of lithographic reproduction for mythological subject. These paintings are, generally, large ones, depicting a historic moment or scene from an epic or a classical text, painted in the midst of a dramatic action. It is intended to be noble, momentous and emotional. This scene is taken from *Valmiki Ramayana*, where Rama needs to build a bridge in southern India to the island of Lanka for his army to cross the ocean. He prays to the God of Ocean, Varuna, to permit him to cross the ocean but Varuna does not respond. Then, in anger, Rama stands to shoot his fiery arrow into the ocean. Immediately, Varuna appears and appeases Rama. The event depicted in this painting sequentially serves as a springboard for the next one. The story unfolds itself as each painting leaps to the succeeding one, covering in the process not only the major moments in the lives of Rama and Sita but the entire epic. Varma also painted *Release of Ahalya*, *Rama Breaking the Sacred Bow of Siva before his Marriage to Sita*, *Rama, Sita and Laksmana Crossing the Saryu*, *Ravana abducting Sita and Opposed by Jatayu*, *Sita in Ashoka Grove*, *The Coronation of Rama*, etc.

WOMAN WITH CHILD

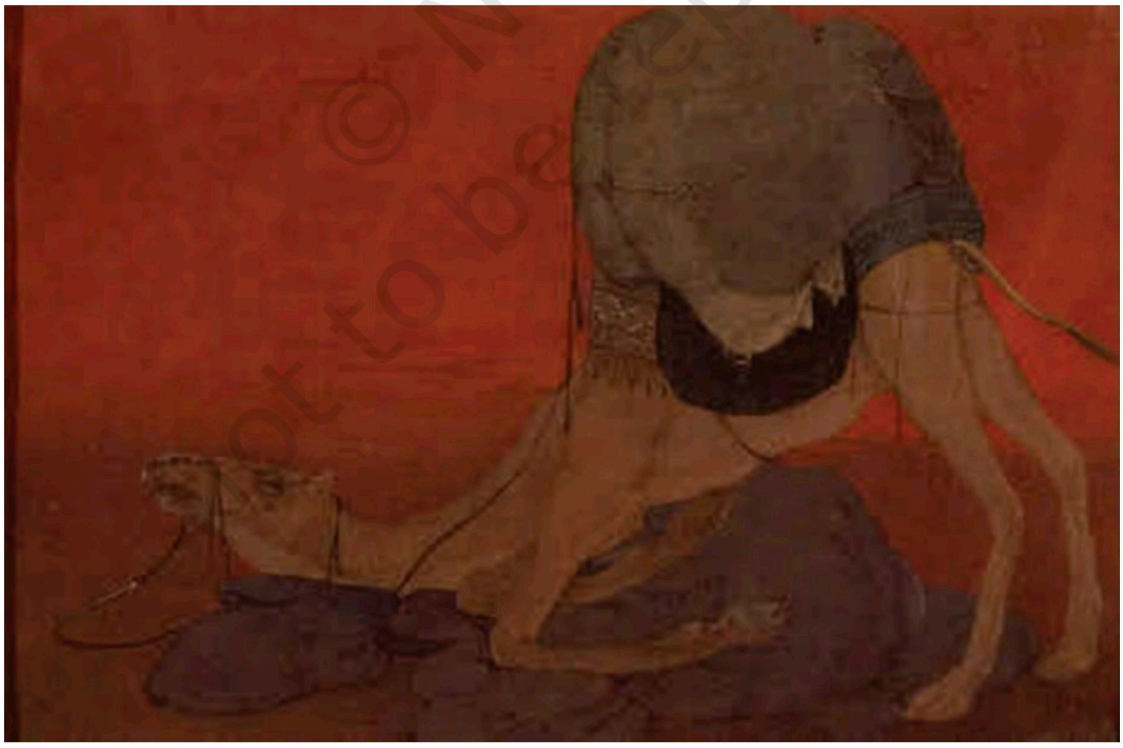


This is a gouache painting on paper made by Jamini Roy (1887–1972) in 1940. He was called the father of the folk renaissance in India, who created an alternative vision of modern Indian identity. In the mid–1920s, he travelled to the countryside of Bengal to collect folk paintings (*pats*) and learn from folk artisans. He wanted to learn from the expressive power of their lines. In this painting, a mother and her child are rendered with bold simplifications and thick outlines with sweeping brush strokes. The painting exudes a crude vigour hitherto unknown in Indian art. Figures are coloured in dull yellow and brick-red background, emulating the terracotta relief of his home village in Bankura. The two-dimensional nature of the painting is derived from *pat* paintings and his search for simplicity and pure form is visible. Roy borrowed volume, rhythm, decorative clarity and instrumentality of the *pat* in his artworks. To achieve and learn the purity of the *pat*, he first made many monochrome brush drawings, and then, gradually, moved to basic seven colours applied with tempera. He used Indian red, yellow ocher, cadmium green, vermilion, charcoal gray, cobalt blue and white made from organic material, such as rockdust, tamarind seeds, mercury powder, alluvial mud, indigo and common chalk. He used lamp black to outline the drawings and started making his own canvas with home-spun fabric (*pats* used paper or cloth or baked paper). Roy used the notion of village community as a weapon of resistance to colonial rule and a political act of making local signify national.

JOURNEY'S END

Made by Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) in 1913, this painting is in watercolour. Abanindranath Tagore was seen as a father figure of nationalist and modernism of art in India. He revived certain aspects of Indian and oriental traditions of paintings in terms of themes, style and techniques, and invented the wash painting technique. The wash technique yields a soft, misty and impressionistic landscape. This quality of hazy and atmospheric effects of the wash are utilised to be suggestive or evocative of an end of a life.

In this painting, a collapsed camel is shown in red background of dusk and in that sense it personifies the end of a journey through the end of a day. Abanindranath tried to capture the portrait and narration with the help of symbolic aesthetics on one hand and literary allusions on the other. The physical features of the camel rendered appropriately in fine lines and delicate tones, and its sensory texture leads us to the meaning of the painting. Abanindranath has also painted *The Forest*, *Coming of Night*, *Mountain Traveller*, *Queen of the Forest* and a series of 45 paintings based on *The Arabian Nights*.



The Pahari Schools of Painting 5

Pahari denotes 'hilly or mountainous' in origin. Pahari Schools of Painting includes towns, such as Basohli, Guler, Kangra, Kullu, Chamba, Mankot, Nurpur, Mandi, Bilaspur, Jammu and others in the hills of western Himalayas, which emerged as centres of painting from seventeenth to nineteenth century. Beginning at Basohli with a coarsely flamboyant style, it blossomed into the most exquisite and sophisticated style of Indian painting known as the Kangra School, through the Guler or pre-Kangra phase.

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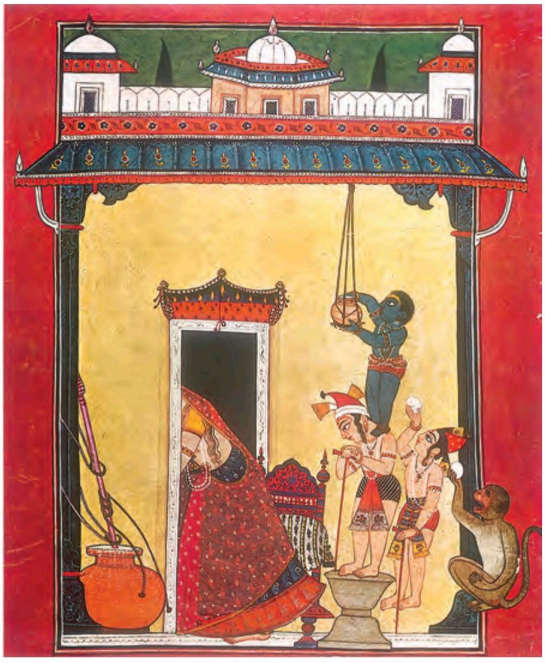
Unlike the distinguishing stylistic features of Mughal, Deccani and Rajasthani Schools, Pahari paintings demonstrate challenges in their territorial classification.

Though all the above centres crafted precisely individualistic characteristics in painting (through the depiction of nature, architecture, figural types, facial features, costumes, preference for particular colours and such other things), they do not develop as independent schools with distinctive styles. Paucity of dated material, colophons and inscriptions also prevent informed categorisation.

Krishna steals butter, Bhagvata Purana, 1750, N. C. Mehta Collection, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India



The emergence of the Pahari School remains unclear, though scholars have cautiously proposed theories concerning its beginning and influences. It is widely accepted that Mughal and Rajasthani styles of paintings were known in the hills probably through examples of Provincial Mughal style and family relationships of hill Rajas with the royal courts of Rajasthan. However, the flamboyantly bold Basohli-like style is, generally, understood to be the earliest prevailing pictorial language. B. N. Goswamy, one of the most significant scholars of the Pahari Schools of Painting, has attributed the shaping of Pahari style from

the simplicity of Basohli to poetic lyricism and refinement of Kangra to the ingenuity of a family of artists through his scholarly approach of family as the basis of style. His central argument is that the family of Pandit Seu (Shiv) was chiefly responsible for the course of Pahari paintings. He argues that identifying Pahari paintings on the basis of regions could be misleading as political boundaries were always fluid. This argument is also true for Rajasthani schools as attribution merely by regions creates vagueness and several disparities remain unexplained. Hence, if a family of artists is considered as the style bearer, justification of multiple strands of a style can be accommodated within the same region and school.

Scholars agree that in the early eighteenth century, the style of the Seu family and others conformed to the Basohli idiom. However, from middle of the eighteenth century, the style transformed through a pre-Kangra phase, maturing into the Kangra style. This abrupt transformation in style and beginning of experimentation, which gave rise to varied stylistic idioms related to different Pahari centres, is largely ascribed to responses by various artist families and paintings (especially, the Mughal style) that were introduced in the Pahari kingdoms. This sudden arrival of paintings, which might have been introduced through rulers, artists, traders or any such agency or event, impacted local artists and profoundly influenced their painting language.

Rama and Sita in the forest, Kangra, 1780, Douglas Barrett Collection, UK

Most scholars, now, dispute the earlier hypothesis that the sudden change was caused and initiated by the migration of artists from the Mughal atelier.

For Goswamy, it was the naturalism in these paintings that appealed to the sensibilities of Pahari artists.

Compositions, worked out from a relative point of view, show some paintings with decorated margins. Themes that included recording the daily routine or important occasions from the lives of kings, creation of new prototype for female form and an idealised face, are all associated with this newly emerging style that gradually matures to the Kangra phase.

Basohli School

The first and most dramatic example of work from the hill states is from Basohli. From 1678 to 1695, Kirpal Pal, an enlightened prince, ruled the state. Under him, Basohli developed a distinctive and magnificent style. It is characterised by a strong use of primary colours and warm yellows—filling the background and horizon, stylised treatment of vegetation and raised white paint for imitating the representation of pearls in ornaments. However, the most significant characteristic of Basohli painting is the use of small, shiny green particles of beetle wings to delineate jewellery and simulate the effect of emeralds. In their vibrant palette and elegance, they share the aesthetics of the Chaurpanchashika group of paintings of Western India.

The most popular theme of Basohli painters was the *Rasamanjari* of Bhanu Datta. In 1694–95, Devida, a *tarkhan* (carpenter–painter), did a magnificent series for his patron Kirpal Pal. *Bhagvata Purana* and *Ragamala* were other popular themes. Artists also painted portraits of local kings with their consorts, courtiers, astrologers, mendicants,

Rasamanjari, Basohli, 1720, British Museum, London, UK

Rama gives away his possessions, Ayodhya Kanda, Shangri Ramayana, 1690–1700, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA

courtesans and others. While artist ateliers from Basohli, gradually, spread to other hill states, such as Chamba and Kullu, giving rise to local variations of the Basohli *kalam.* A new style of painting came in vogue during 1690s to 1730s, which was referred to as the Guler–Kangra phase. Artists during this period indulged in experimentation and improvisations that finally resulted and moulded into the Kangra style.

Hence, originating in Basohli, the style gradually spread to other hill states of Mankot, Nurpur, Kullu, Mandi, Bilaspur, Chamba, Guler and Kangra.

The Sanskrit epic, *Ramayana*, was one of the favourite texts of the hill artists at Basohli, as well as, Kullu. This set derives its name from 'Shangri', the place of residence of a branch of the Kullu royal family, patrons and formerly possessors of this set. These works of Kullu artists were influenced in varying degrees by the styles of Basohli and Bilaspur.

Rama learns of his exile and prepares to leave Ayodhya along with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana. Maintaining equanimity of mind, Rama indulges in his last acts of giving away his possessions. At the request of Rama, his brother piles up his belongings and the crowd begins to gather to receive the largesse of their beloved Rama—jewellery, sacrificial vessels, thousand cows and other treasures.

Rama and Lakshmana following sage Vishvamitra to the forest, Bala Kanda, Shangri Ramayana 1680–1688, Raja Raghbir Singh Collection, Shangri, Kullu Valley, India

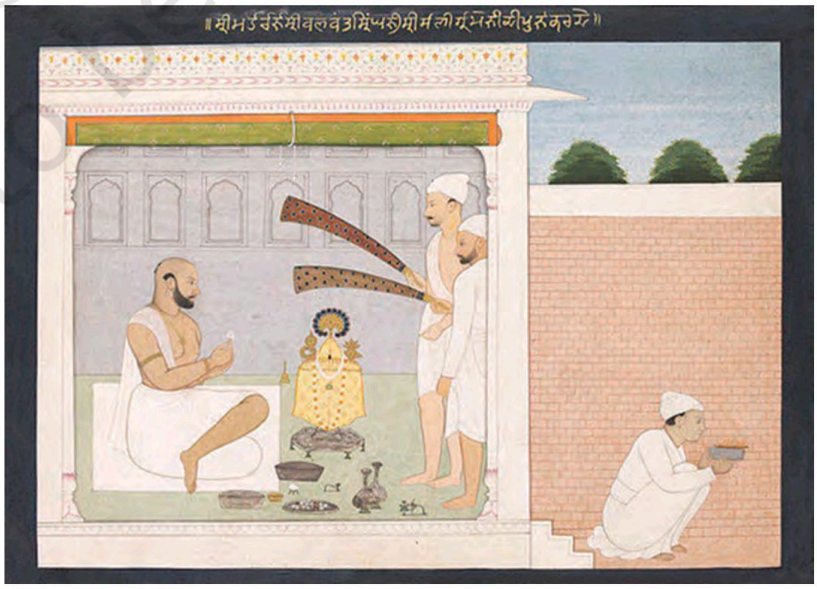
Set apart on the left are the two princes with Sita standing on a carpet with a crowd of recipients moving towards them. The painter carefully introduces different types—recluses, Brahmins, courtiers, commoners and servants of the royal household. The bounteous gifts represented are pile of gold coins and garments on the carpet, and cows and calves unaware of the momentous event, beseechingly looking at Rama with necks stretched, gazes fixed and mouths wide open. The gravity of the situation is sensitively portrayed through varying expressions—the serene but gently smiling Rama, curious Lakshmana, an apprehensive Sita, Brahmins willing to receive but with no pleasure, and others with expressions of disbelief and gratitude. Taking pleasure in achieving fine effects, the artist delightfully depicts transparency of the garment Rama is holding out, stippled beard on the cheek and chin of the Brahmins, *tilak* marks, jewellery and weapons.

Another painting from the same set depicts Rama and Lakshmana accompanying sage Vishvamitra to the forest to defeat the demons, who would distress the hermits by disturbing their meditative practices and contaminating their rituals. An interesting feature of this painting is the representation of animals, stealthily prowling behind trees, half hidden in the heavy outgrowth. A clever fragmentary portrayal of a wolf on the left and a tiger on the right by

the artist not only lends character to the forest as a thick impenetrable jungle, populated with ferocious animals hiding everywhere, but also adds an emotive value to the painting regarding the extraordinary courage of the two young princes. The fractional representation of animals adds mystery to the work as there is a possibility of them being demons in disguise.

Guler School

The first quarter of the eighteenth century saw a complete transformation in the Basohli style, initiating the Guler–Kangra phase. This phase first appeared in Guler, a high-ranking branch of the Kangra royal family, under the patronage of Raja Govardhan Chand (1744–1773). Guler artist Pandit Seu with his sons Manak and Nainsukh are attributed with changing the course of painting around 1730–40 to a new style, usually, referred to as the pre–Kangra or Guler–Kangra *kalam*. This style is more refined, subdued and elegant compared to the bold vitality of the Basohli style. Though initiated by Manak, also called Manaku, his brother Nainsukh, who became the court painter of Raja Balwant Singh of Jasrota, is responsible for shaping the Guler School emphatically. The most matured version of this style entered Kangra during the 1780s, thus, developing into the Kangra School while the offshoots of Basohli continued in Chamba and Kullu, India.



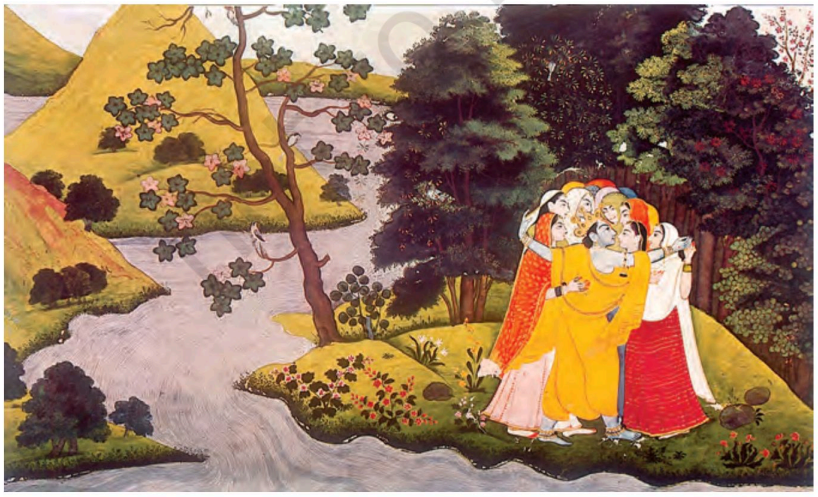
Balwant Singh in prayer, Nainsukh, 1750, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK

Sons and grandsons of Manak and Nainsukh worked at many other centres and are responsible for the finest examples of Pahari paintings.

Guler appears to have a long tradition of paintings amongst all Pahari schools. There is evidence that artists were working in Haripur–Guler ever since the reign of Dalip Singh (1695–1743) as many of his and his son Bishan Singh's portraits, dating back to earlier than 1730s, i.e., before the beginning of the Guler–Kangra phase can be found. Bishan Singh died during the lifetime of his father Dalip Singh. So, his younger brother Govardhan Chand ascended to the throne that witnessed a change in painting style.

Manak's most outstanding work is a set of *Gita Govinda* painted in 1730 at Guler, retaining some of the elements of the Basohli style, most strikingly the lavish use of beetle's wing casings.

Nainsukh appears to have left his hometown in Guler and moved to Jasrota. He is believed to have initially worked for Mian Zoravar Singh, whose son and successor Balwant Singh of Jasrota was to become his greatest patron. Nainsukh's celebrated pictures of Balwant Singh are unique in the kind of visual record they offer of the patron's life. Balwant Singh is portrayed engaged in various activities — performing *puja*, surveying a building site, sitting in a camp wrapped in a quilt because of the cold weather, and so on. The artist gratified his patron's obsession by painting him on every possible occasion. Nainsukh's genius was for individual portraiture that became a salient feature of the later Pahari style.



Krishna embracing gopis, Gita Govinda, Guler, 1760–1765, N. C. Mehta Collection, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

His palette comprised delicate pastel shades with daring expanses of white or grey.

Manaku, too, did numerous portraits of his enthusiastic patron Raja Govardhan Chand and his family. Prakash Chand, successor of Govardhan Chand, shared his father's passion for art and had sons of Manaku and Nainsukh, Khushala, Fattu and Gaudhu as artists in his court.

Kangra School

Painting in the Kangra region blossomed under the patronage of a remarkable ruler, Raja Sansar Chand (1775–1823). It is believed that when Prakash Chand of Guler came under grave financial crisis and could no longer maintain his atelier, his master artist, Manaku, and his sons took service under Sansar Chand of Kangra.

Sansar Chand ascended to the throne at the tender age of 10 years after the kingdom had been restored to its earlier glory by his grandfather Ghamand Chand. They belonged to the Katoch dynasty of rulers, who had been ruling the Kangra region for a long time until Jahangir conquered their territory in the seventeenth century and made them his vassals. After the decline of the Mughal power, Raja Ghamand Chand recovered most of the territory and founded his capital town of Tira Sujanpur on the banks of river Beas and constructed fine monuments. He also maintained an atelier of artists.

Kaliya Mardana, Bhagvata Purana, Kangra, 1785, National Museum, New Delhi, India

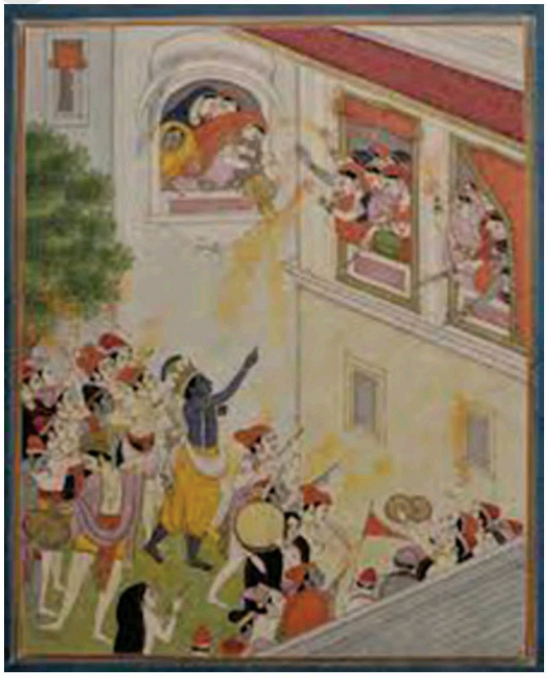
Raja Sansar Chand established supremacy of Kangra over all surrounding hill states. Tira Sujanpur emerged as the most prolific centre of painting under his patronage. An earlier phase of Kangra *kalam* paintings is witnessed in Alampur and the most matured paintings were painted at Nadaun, where Sansar Chand shifted later in his life. All these centres were on the banks of river Beas. Alampur along with river Beas can be recognised in some paintings. Less number of paintings was done in Kangra as it remained under the Mughals till 1786, and later, the Sikhs.

Sansar Chand's son Aniruddha Chand (1823–1831), too, was a generous patron and is often seen painted with his courtiers.

The Kangra style is by far the most poetic and lyrical of Indian styles marked with serene beauty and delicacy of execution. Characteristic features of the Kangra style are delicacy of line, brilliance of colour and minuteness of decorative details. Distinctive is the delineation of the female face, with straight nose in line with the forehead, which came in vogue around the 1790s is the most distinctive feature of this style.

Most popular themes that were painted were the *Bhagvata Purana*, *Gita Govinda*, *Nala Damayanti*, *Bihari Satsai*, *Ragamala* and *Baramasa*. Many other paintings comprise a pictorial record of Sansar Chand and his court. He is shown sitting by the riverside, listening to music, watching dancers, presiding over festivals, practising tent pegging and archery, drilling troops, and so on and forth. Fattu, Purkhu and Khushala are important painters of the Kangra style.

Krishna playing Holi with gopis, Kangra, 1800, National Museum, New Delhi, India



During Sansar Chand's reign, the production of Kangra School was far greater than any other hill state. He exercised wide political power and was able to support a large studio with artists from Guler and other areas. The Kangra style soon spread from Tira Sujanpur to Garhwal in the east and Kashmir in the west. Painting activity was severely affected around 1805 when the Gurkhas besieged the Kangra fort and Sansar Chand had to flee to his hill palace at Tira Sujanpur. In 1809, with

the help of Ranjit Singh, the Gurkhas were driven away. Though Sansar Chand continued to maintain his atelier of artists, the work no longer paralleled masterpieces of the period 1785–1805.

This series of *Bhagvata Purana* paintings is one of the greatest achievements of Kangra artists. It is remarkable for its effortless naturalism, deft and vivid rendering of figures in unusual poses that crisply portray dramatic scenes. The principal master is believed to have been a descendent of Nainsukh, commanding much of his skill.

Re-enacting Krishna's deeds, Bhagvata Purana, Guler–Kangra, India, 1780–85, Private Collection

This painting is a depiction from *Rasa Panchdhyayi*, a group of five chapters from the *Bhagvata Purana* devoted to the philosophical concept of *Rasa*. It has passages that speak movingly of the love that *gopis* have for Krishna. Their pain is real when Krishna suddenly disappears. In their forlorn state of separation, they appear utterly devastated with the fruitlessness of search when the deer, trees or creepers, whom they address in their distracted state, do not have answers to their piteous questions regarding the whereabouts of Krishna.

With minds engrossed in thoughts of Krishna, the *gopis* recall and enact his various *lilas* or feats. Some of them being—the killing of Putana, liberation of Yamala–Arjun after Krishna was tied to a mortar by Yashoda, lifting of Mount Govardhan and rescuing the inhabitants of Braj from the heavy downpour and wrath of Indra, subduing of serpent

Kaliya, and the intoxicating call and allure of Krishna's flute. The *gopis* take on different roles and emulate his divine sports.

The artist captures and evokes these sensitive images exquisitely in this folio. On the extreme left, a *gopi* enacts Krishna's part as she bends forward and appears to suck the bosom of another *gopi,* who plays the role of Putana and raises her hand to the head in response, as if dying while her breath is being sucked away. Next to them, another *gopi* enacts the character of Yashoda, who along with other *gopis*, holds out her garment in a gesture of removing the evil eye after the young Krishna performed the brave feat of killing Putana.

In the group beside this towards the right, a *gopi* enacts the mortar to which another *gopi*, who plays the role of young Krishna, is tied with a cloth band, while his mother admonishingly stands holding a stick in her hands. In the adjoining group, a *gopi*, sporting a turban, lifts her piled up *odhni* atop in the guise of lifting Mount Govardhan, while others seek protection underneath. To the extreme left in the bottom, a *gopi* enacts Krishna, who is playing flute, as some *gopis* dance and sing, and others crawl towards him, disentangling themselves from their angry mothers-in-law, who try to drag and hold them back from going. In the most magnificent of these cameos to the extreme bottom in the right, a *gopi* hurls a blue garment edged with gold over the ground, which takes the form of the multiple hooded serpent Kaliya, upon whom she dances like Krishna.

Depiction of *Ashta Nayikas* or eight heroines is one of the most painted themes in Pahari paintings, involving the depiction of women in various dispositions and emotive states. To mention a few—*Utka* is the one who is anticipating the arrival of her beloved and patiently waits for him, *Svandhinpatika* is the one whose husband is subject to her will, *Vasaksajja* awaits her beloved's return from a voyage and decorates the bed with flowers in a welcoming gesture, and *Kalahantarita* is the one who resists her beloved when he seeks to soften her pride and repents when he comes late.

Abhisarika Nayika, Kangra, 1810–20, Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, India

A couple in the month of Jyestha, Kangra, 1800, National Museum, New Delhi, India

Even though describing *Ashta Nayikas* remained a favourite among poets and painters, none of them is treated with as much flair as the *Abhisarika*, one who hastens to meet her beloved braving all hazards. The situation conceived is, generally, full of bizarre and dramatic possibilities with the passion and steadfastness of the *nayika,* triumphing against the opposing elements of nature.

In this painting, the *sakhi* is recounting how the *nayika* crossed the woods in the night to meet her beloved. The *yoga,* the poet speaks of, refers to the single-mindedness of purpose with which the *nayika* moves through the dark forest in the night.

The broad iconography of the *Abhisarika* remains much the same. However, at times, painters vary their renderings in some measure. The *ghouls* that, usually, appear in many versions are omitted here. But the darkness of the night, flashes of lighting, murky clouds, snakes hissing about in the dark, emerging from hollows of the trees and falling jewellery are all painted.

The *Baramasa* paintings, consisting of 12 folios, illustrating the modes of love or courtship appropriate to each month of the year had become a popular theme in the hills during the nineteenth century.

An account of *Baramasa* is given by Keshav Das in the tenth chapter of *Kavipriya*. He, thus, describes the hot month of *Jyeshtha*, which falls in the months of May and June. The painter takes utmost delight in depicting all analogues as described by the poet.

The Kangra School came to fore in the 1780s while the offshoots of the Basohli style emerged and continued in centres such as Chamba, Kullu, Nurpur, Mankot, Jasrota, Mandi, Bilaspur, Jammu and others with some of their specific characteristics. In Kashmir (1846–1885), the Kangra style initiated a local school of Hindu book illumination. The Sikhs employed other Kangra painters eventually.

There is a broad classification of three styles—Basohli, Guler and Kangra, and scholars may have variant terms for the same. However, these are indicative centres from where the style travels elsewhere. Hence, in Jasrota, as one observes the Guler style, it becomes categorised under the Guler

School with Jasrota as one of its centres. Briefly mentioning the aspects of the other centres, one finds portraits of the rulers of Chamba in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century in the Basohli style.

Kullu emerged with a distinctive style, where figures had a prominent chin and wide open eyes, and lavish use of grey and terracotta red colours in the background was made. *Shangri Ramayana* is a well-known set painted in the Kullu Valley in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Paintings of this set vary from each other in style, and, thus it is believed that these were painted by different sets of artists. It is believed that when the Basohli style had outgrown itself and matured into the Kangra style, Nurpur artists retained the vibrant colours of Basohli with the dainty figure types of Kangra.

Due to marital relations between Basohli and Mankot, few artists from Basohli seem to have shifted to Mankot, thereby, developing a similar school of painting. While Jasrota had an indulgent patron in Balwant Singh and the school is well-known through his numerous portraits painted by his court artist, Nainsukh, who led the earlier simple Basohli style to new sophistication. This style of Nainsukh is also referred to as the Guler–Kangra style.

Rulers of Mandi were ardent worshippers of Vishnu and Shiva. Hence, apart from the *Krishna Lila* themes, Shaivite subjects were also painted. An artist named Molaram is associated with the Garhwal School. Several signed paintings by him have been discovered. This school was influenced by the Kangra style of Sansar Chand phase.

EXERCISE

1. Representation of nature in Pahari miniature paintings is found everywhere. According to you, what could be the reasons for this?
2. What are the major schools of Pahari miniature paintings and list their places of expansion. How were they different from each other? Mark all schools of Himalayan (*Pahari*) paintings on a map.
3. Select a poem or a story and illustrate in it any style of Pahari miniature painting.
4. Prepare small critiques on works of the following.
   (a) Nainsukh (b) Basohali paintings
   (c) *Ashta Nayikas* (d) Kangra *kalam*

AWAITING KRISHNA AND THE HESITANT RADHA

Artist Pandit Seu had two talented sons, Manak or Manaku and Nainsukh. Their contribution in maneuvering the style of Pahari painting from the stage of Basohli to that of Kangra is immense. Their sons, in turn, represent the glorious period of Kangra. This painting is categorised in the Guler–Kangra phase, wherein, experimentation for change had already been initiated.

Gita Govinda is Manaku's most outstanding set of works. As mentioned earlier, composed by Jayadeva, *Gita Govinda* begins with the description of how Radha and Krishna fall in love on the banks of river Yamuna. A delightful description of spring follows and the poet describes the sports of Krishna with other *gopis*. Ignored by Krishna, heartbroken Radha sulks in a bower as her friend, *sakhi,* describes how Krishna continues to wander with the pretty cowherd girls. After sometime, Krishna feels remorseful and starts looking for Radha, and on not finding her, laments for her. The messenger, now, goes to Radha and tells her of the longing of Krishna for her. Ultimately, she persuades her to meet him and what follows is the mystic union. Though the characters are divine and enact the play at a philosophical plane, where Radha is a devotee or soul, and Krishna, the cosmic power, in whom she is to be drowned. The love sport played here is rather human.

In this painting, Radha is shown feeling shy and hesitant as she approaches the forested area, while Krishna is seen eagerly waiting for her.

The source to the artist's imagination is the inscription on the reverse of the painting, which is translated as follows.

"Radha! *Sakhis* have come to know the secret that your soul is intent on the warfare of love. Now, abandon your shyness, let your girdle tinkle merrily and go ahead to meet your beloved. Radha! Lead yourself with some favoured maid; grasp her hands with your fingers that are soft and smooth as love's arrows. March and let the jingle of your bangles proclaim your approach to your loved one."

This beautiful song of Jayadeva may always rest upon the lips of the devotees of Krishna.

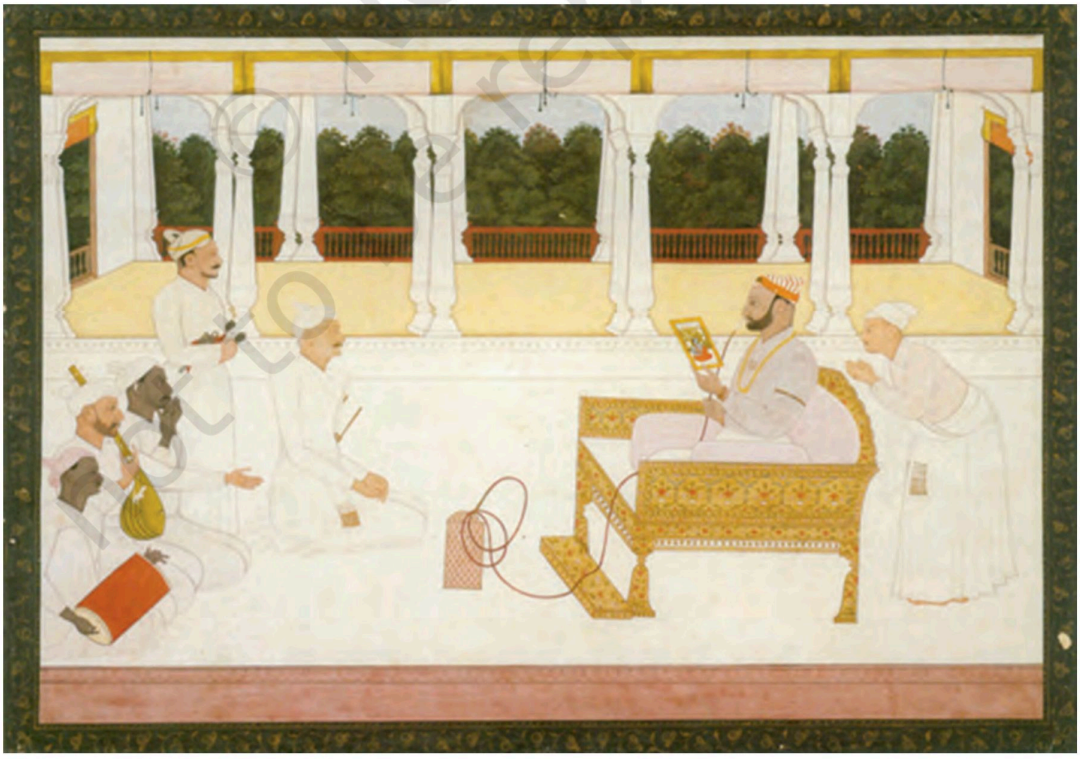
Ultimately Radha accepts the advice of her companions and Jayadeva, thus, describes the following.

"Then, she, no more delaying, entered straight; her step a little faltered, but her face shone with unutterable love; the music of her bangles passed the entrance; shame which had lingered in her downcast eyes, departed shamed…"

BALWANT SINGH LOOKING AT A PAINTING WITH NAINSUKH

The painting depicts Prince Balwant Singh of Jasrota closely observing a painting that he is holding in his hands. A figure standing behind him politely bowing down probably represents none other than the artist of the painting, Nainsukh. This painting is probably a rare, where Nainsukh paints himself with his patron.

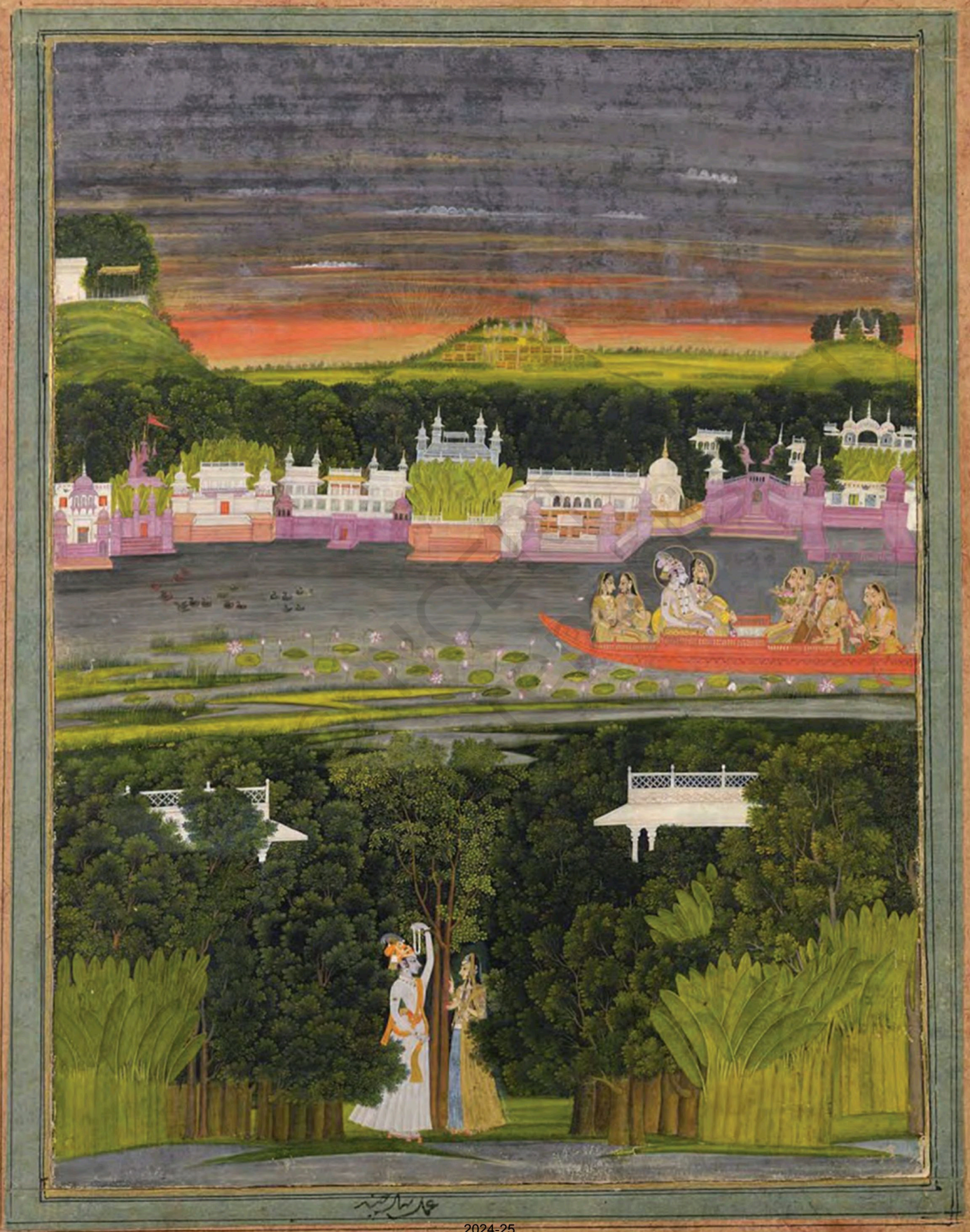
Balwant Singh is seated in his palace, overlooking the lush green landscape teeming with trees. The time depicted appears to be that of early evening and Nainsukh's clutter-free composition is itself indicative of quietude, peace and tranquillity that are suggestive of Balwant Singh's temperament in the painting. He is smoking *hukka,* something that, he usually, indulged in during spells of break between work. Musicians are deftly placed towards the outer edge of the painting so as to indicate their presence. Their positioning, in the painting, suggests that they are not clamouring to be heard but 'softly' producing music, thus, enhancing the calmness, while Balwant Singh remains engrossed in the details of the painting that depicts Krishna.



NANDA, YASHODA AND KRISHNA

This painting also illustrates a scene from the *Bhagvata Purana* and depicts Nanda with his family and relatives, travelling to Vrindavan. They found Gokul infested with demons that bothered Krishna to no end, and hence, decided to move to a safer place. In the painting, Nanda is seen leading the group on his bullock cart and is followed by another bullock cart, wherein, both brothers, Krishna and Balaram and their respective mothers, Yashoda and Rohini, are seated. Men and women carrying various household items and children are seen accompanying them. Detailing in their expressions, the activities they are indulging in are intriguing. The tilt of their heads as they talk to each other, an expression of fatigue expressed with downcast eyes because of the heaviness of load on the head and the taut stretching of arms as one firmly holds on to the vessel on the head are all examples of amazing observation and excellent skill.

Kangra painters, as discussed in the earlier part of the chapter, acutely observe the landscape and represent it naturalistically. The details are eloquently expressed. One also observes a flush-cut composition, resembling a photograph, which lends naturalism to the painting.



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